

CORPORATE COUNSEL

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Q&A

New US Chamber of Commerce GC Seeks Higher Profile for Litigation Center

In an exclusive interview with Corporate Counsel, John Wood recently talked about his new job, his priorities and his goals. The new general counsel knows Washington, D.C., and its politics well. He most recently was a partner at Hughes Hubbard & Reed in the capital.

By **Sue Reisinger** | November 21, 2018 at 02:13 PM



John Wood, general counsel of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Nov. 15, 2018. Photo credit: Diego Radzinski/ALM

During his first six months as the new senior vice president, chief legal officer and general counsel of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, John Wood moved to beef up the U.S. Chamber Litigation Center, which is an affiliated incorporated public policy law firm that fights on behalf of business causes.

In an exclusive interview with Corporate Counsel, Wood recently talked about his new job, his priorities and his goals.

The new general counsel knows Washington, D.C., and its politics well. He most recently was a partner at Hughes Hubbard & Reed in the capital.

He formerly served as U.S. attorney for the Western District of Missouri; deputy associate attorney general and counselor to the attorney general at the U.S. Department of Justice;

continued on next page

and deputy general counsel in the White House Office of Management and Budget. He also was a law clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and for Judge J. Michael Luttig at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. He served as an aide to U.S. Sen. John C. Danforth of Missouri.

Here are excerpts from Wood's interview, edited for clarity and length:

Corporate Counsel: Please briefly describe your job.

Wood: I oversee the office of general counsel and provide legal advice internally to the chamber. I also oversee the litigation center, which litigates on behalf of business across the country, including before the U.S. Supreme Court.

You've never been a general counsel before. How does your background and experience serve you in the new post?

In several ways. My background as a litigator, and as an appellate lawyer, including before the U.S. Supreme Court, helps with my work at the litigation center. Also, when I worked in government, I helped oversee litigation.

Advising companies and boards of directors on legal issues while in private practice also helped prepare me for the responsibility of a general counsel.

I did a lot of work on corporate compliance and internal investigations in private practice. And while in government, I supervised and managed teams of people as I'm doing now.

What are your priorities in the new job?

We had a couple vacancies at the litigation center, so my immediate priority was assembling the best possible team I could. I am very fortunate to have found success with hiring Daryl Joseffer as chief counsel for appellate litigation. [Joseffer is a former principal deputy solicitor general who has argued at least 12 cases in the U.S. Supreme Court.] And I hired Jonathan Urick [a former appellate lawyer at McGuireWoods in Richmond, Virginia, and former law clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas] as senior counsel.

They join an already good team with [senior vice president and chief counsel] Steven Lehotsky and others for what I call the dream team.

Do you have a legal strategy for the litigation center?

Two areas we are very focused on are fighting against government regulatory overreach, and against class action abuses.

One thing I want to do is expand and build on the outstanding work the chamber already does. I also want to expand the profile of the litigation center. It is very well known and respected in federal courts and the D.C. appellate bar. I want it to become better known by companies around the country, and not just among a narrow set of D.C. appellate litigators.

Expanding its profile will increase the number of cases brought to our attention. They will be brought to us at an earlier stage, and enhance our ability to help shape the law in the courts.

Did you see anything in the midterm election results that would affect your strategy?

The results will affect things that others at the chamber do in terms of lobbying and policy initiatives, but there will not be much impact on the litigation center. The fact that the Republicans kept a majority in the U.S. Senate means it's more likely that the president's nominees for federal courts will be confirmed, and that's something we will keep in mind for future strategy for litigation.

Do you have any other goals you are working on?

One thing I'm trying to do is develop enhanced relations with companies in the high-technology sector. It is a growth area. We certainly have several companies that are members of the litigation center, but we want more.

Is that a good fit for the chamber? It seems many of the tech companies and the chamber have been on different sides of recent legal issues, such as climate change or treatment of immigrants.

Well, the litigation center doesn't engage in political activities. It is its own legally incorporated entity. We just litigate in courts on behalf of business interests. Even the more liberal companies can recognize the value that the litigation center brings to the overall business community.